

“Time in the Wilderness”

Luke 4:1-13

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You probably don't know this, but during my first week here at CCC, I almost quit.

I believe it was my third day on the job. I had just gotten my office situated: framed seminary degree on the wall, the pens neatly arranged in a mug on my desk, my new Bible taken out of its shrink wrap and placed on a shelf close at hand. I mean, I was ready for this ministry thing!

And then the phone rang. Wow, a phone call to me, a minister! I answered, “Community Christian Church, this is Kory.”

On the other end was a lady who was distraught over her teenage daughter. The daughter had been acting extremely rebellious lately, staying out until the morning hours, and basically wreaking havoc on the family. As I listened, I secretly began wondering what page this was on in my Intro. to Pastoral Counseling textbook, and if the phone cord would reach far enough across the room so I could grab it before she stopped talking.

After about four minutes of venting, the woman paused and said, “So, what do I do?” Remembering my training, I didn't try to offer any quick solutions or patronizing advice; like my professor said, empathize and be honest. In my best pastor voice I said, “Gosh, that's a tough situation you're in. I wish I had an easy answer for you.” There was a pause on the other end of the line, and then a very perturbed voice said, “Well, that's just not good enough!”

Obviously, this woman hadn't taken the same Pastoral Counseling class I did, because she was suppose to thank me for my honesty and then tell the congregation what a wonderful listener I was. As I sat in the very uncomfortable silence following that comment, I wondered if I hadn't somehow misheard God when He called me; maybe what God actually said was that I was supposed to work with *plaster*. I began wondering if Home Depot was hiring.

I think Jesus can relate to the rough start of my ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus goes to the Jordan River and is baptized, which marks the beginning of his ministry, and then immediately is led into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and an encounter with Satan. No meet-and-greets, no potluck socials or newsletter articles. At his baptism, Jesus heard a voice say, “This is my son.” And now, in the wilderness, he hears, “*If* you are the son of God.” Just like my situation, Jesus is being forced to question his identity.

But it's not only Jesus' identity that's at stake; it's the whole identity of the Jewish people. The people listening and reading this story when it first circulated would have heard in it many parallels to an earlier story. After Moses freed the Israelites, they spent 40 years wandering around in the wilderness. In fact, Jesus responds to Satan with quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, which chronicles part of that journey.

But this temptation story calls to mind an even earlier tale, in which Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted some of God's other children. These two weren't as strong as Jesus, and gave into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. Jesus isn't just fighting for his own identity; he has a chance to undo what was done in the Garden of Eden, to break Satan's sinful hold on humanity. If he can say no to temptation.

Now, it's not really fair, because we know the end of the story, but if we try to listen to it like we don't know what's going to happen, we have reason to doubt whether Jesus will be strong enough. After all, he hasn't done any miracles or healed anyone yet. Plus, he's been fasting for forty days. Now, I don't know about you, but when I'm hungry, I'm vulnerable. If I go shopping on an empty stomach, I easily succumb to all kinds of temptations. I'll get home and Leigh will say, "Do we really need four bags of potato chips and three cartons of Rocky Road ice cream?" What can I say, I was hungry!

So Satan strikes at Jesus when he is most vulnerable. Isn't that the way temptation works? It's when we're at our weakest, our most exposed, that temptation will try to lure us. Like Mae West said, "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it." It's hard to resist it when you're hungry, or lonely, or unhappy.

So Jesus is faced with a series of three tests from Satan. This text is the answer for anyone who questions Jesus' humanity. Was Jesus really human? This passage tells us that, like any human being, Jesus faced temptation. That means temptation is not a sin. It's not wrong to be tempted, only to give into it. We don't think of Martin Luther as a great comedian, but he once said, "You can't help it if a bird flies over your head, but you don't need to let it make a nest in your hair." Temptation is not sin, but it is the wakeup call that tells us sin is lurking close.

In all three of these temptations, Satan tries to get Jesus to act independently of God. First, he tempts him to turn a stone into bread. Now, for a man who hadn't eaten in 40 days, that had to be a tough one to resist. I mean, if I go a couple of hours without food, I'm scouring the snack cabinet at our house. But forty days? Making one loaf of bread doesn't seem like that big a deal, does it? It makes sense that God would want His son to eat, right?

Isn't it easy to rationalize our way into giving in? It's only a small thing, no one will know, I'll put an extra \$20 in the offering plate on Sunday to make up for it. We do this, don't we? We start out arguing with the temptation, ready to show it who's boss, but we often end up playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist. If we engage Satan in a debate, we'll always lose. You're not going to persuade Satan to change his ways, but he sure can persuade you if you give him the chance. When we rationalize, we begin to tell ourselves rational lies.

For the second temptation, Satan offers to give Jesus authority over all the world if Jesus will bow down and worship him. What Satan is playing on here is the human inclination for ambition. It's the desire to get ahead, to climb the ladder. The problem is that ambition often requires us to worship something or someone along the way other than God. Is it possible to be a Godly person and still get ahead? Probably. But for a Godly person, getting ahead isn't the goal; pleasing God is. There is no goal in life so noble that it is worth abandoning God along the way.

For the third temptation, Satan actually uses scripture to try and convince Jesus. Twice Jesus has answered Satan with scripture, so Satan becomes more devious. It's important that we realize not every use of scripture has pure and noble intentions. The Bible can be misused for ungodly purposes just as well as it is used by Godly people. That's why being familiar with the Bible is so important. Otherwise, we're tempted to believe anything someone says if it's followed by chapter and verse numbers.

Satan tries to make Jesus test God so that God could demonstrate the faithfulness of his promises. This is a hard one for us to avoid. Without even thinking, we'll try to

coerce God into a “show me” position. We pray for something to happen, and the unspoken part of the prayer is, “If this doesn’t happen, God, you’ve failed me.” And when God doesn’t pass the test we’ve set up for Him, we feel like God has abandoned us. Yes, anything is possible with God. But as Jesus reminds us, we don’t get the luxury of dictating which impossible thing it is that God has to do.

So Jesus survives all three temptations. How would you have done? I’d probably be eating bread and bowing down to Satan while I was falling off the temple. Like Rita Mae Brown said, “Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.” But Jesus doesn’t give in, even though he was at his most human. Just think what would have happened if he did. His mission on earth – to die for our sins and give us eternal life – would have been lost.

Jesus didn’t give in because he knew his mission; he knew his identity. He knew what God created him to do, and he measured everything he did against that mission. His purpose was to glorify God, and giving into those temptations would not help him fulfill his purpose. Jesus *will* make a miraculous amount of bread, but it was to feed others, not himself. Jesus *will* have authority over the kingdoms of the world, but that authority will come through much pain and suffering and obedience. And God *will* rescue Jesus, but not until three days after he is crucified and buried. All of these things will be fulfilled, but it will be because Jesus is dependent on God, not acting independently of Him.

What is your mission? What is your purpose? What is your identity? Let me try to help you answer that. You are a child of God, and you were created for the purpose of bringing God glory and helping to make his kingdom real here on earth. That is what you were created for. You’re going to be tempted to say and do all kinds of things that have nothing to do with that purpose. You’ll be tempted to say, “Look at me!” instead of, “Look at God.” You’ll be tempted to do your own thing instead of doing God’s thing. You’ll be tempted to forget your identity and to forego your faithfulness. But because of what Jesus did in the wilderness, you have the power to resist those temptations.

We have entered the season of Lent, which is – hmm, what do you know? – 40 days long. My prayer is that, during this time, you are hungry for God’s word and presence in your life, and that you remember who you are: you are God’s child. Every time you are tempted to do something that won’t help you fulfill your mission, that won’t bring God glory and advance his kingdom here on earth, remember who you are, who you are dependent on, and who you are called to be.